

DON DUNSTAN FOUNDATION  
DON DUNSTAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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**Stewart SWEENEY**

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**This is an interview with Stewart Sweeney on the topic of industrial democracy for the Don Dunstan Oral History Project. The interviewer is George Lewkowicz, the location of the interview is the Don Dunstan Foundation, the date is 17<sup>th</sup> October 2007.**

**Stewart, thanks very much for being happy to do this interview. Just as getting some background on yourself, can you just talk a bit about how you came to South Australia and got interested in the industrial democracy area?**

Yes, George, I'm happy to do that. I arrived in South Australia on 1<sup>st</sup> April – April Fool's Day – 1975, having spent three years previously in Tasmania as a tutor in the Politics Department at the University of Tasmania. Before then, of course, I'd been back in Scotland, born and brought up in the Glasgow area, working-class, Irish–Catholic background, and out of that I guess picked up a sort of class perspective, socialist perspective, 'Red' Clydeside. So I came with that history to Tasmania and, as I say, arrived in South Australia in April 1975.

It was quite a deliberate decision to come to South Australia. Like many others, the Dunstan reforms had caught my interest and I had spent about a year, '74, kind of keeping my eye open for any job opportunities in South Australia. One came up at Flinders University Institute of Labour Studies involved as a research associate working on empirical research studies of worker participation in a number of private-sector and public-sector enterprises in South Australia. Anyway, I applied for that job, got it and ended up working with Phil Bentley and Gordon O'Brien in particular, who had got the money for this project, and spent my first eighteen months or so in South Australia in a range of workplaces interviewing workers around – the central part of that study was really trying to get a picture of the sort of control that the workers had over a whole range of workplace areas and issues and then comparing that to what sort of control they would like to have, focusing on this gap between the reality of what they controlled and their interest or desire to control more.

**Was it academic research or was it for some applied – –?**

It was academic research. The Institute of Labour Studies had won funds, I think, from the then Federal Government research funding bodies and it was, as I say, Phil

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Bentley, Gordon O'Brien leading the study, myself and three or four others working on various aspects of the study. I think brought to the exercise a degree of knowledge about the literature, theoretical economic political literature, around worker participation, workers' control and also some knowledge about what was happening in Europe in these sorts of areas. Plus I also had some experience in undertaking hands-on research.

**What was the sort of academic framework in terms of you doing research on worker participation? What were you actually – I know you talked about their desired level of control and their actual; but what sort of theoretical framework did that fit in that you were placing it in?**

It was mainly actually – the theoretical framework mainly came from Gordon O'Brien, the industrial psychologist. I guess I came from a sociological background that sort of complemented perhaps Gordon's background; but that had all been established before I arrived on the scene and so it was mainly individually-focused and coming out of the psychology literature, and I suspect – though I don't know – that Phil Bentley, who was the other player that got the money, who was a labour economist by background, he was interested in me to bring in that sociological perspective so that when we did a few conference papers, a number of publications, I was able to inject that into it to maybe sit alongside the psychology.

**Which sociologists were you drawing on in terms of their theories?**

Probably Blauner, the French sociologist –

**Sorry, how do you spell that?**

– B-L-A-U-N-E-R – who had researched in France around the concept of alienation and he was building on Marx's work on alienation, although he came up with quite a different explanation as to what caused alienation, but he was similar to Marx in that he identified four different dimensions to alienation which, if my memory serves me, was around ideas like powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and one other which just escapes me for the moment. Anyway, there were these four dimensions of work alienation which we used to try and make sense of the data, so that was probably the single main theoretical source.

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As I say, Blauner's explanation for the source of alienation was that it was derived from a combination of technology and work organisation, which of course contrasted sharply with Marx's explanation which it was built into the essence of capitalism and the economic structures, so Blauner wasn't a theorist I was fully comfortable with in terms of that side of his work but his four dimensions of alienation – three of which I've mentioned, one of which I can't quite remember – they actually paralleled Marx's four dimensions of alienation.

**Can you remember what the research concluded?**

There was indeed – well, two things, perhaps: on these four elements of alienation the workers that we studied and the workplaces that we studied – and two that I remember, perhaps three that I remember in particular was at the Arnott–Motteram–Menz biscuit factory, the radiology section of the Royal Adelaide Hospital and a section of the then State Lands Department – we certainly got a picture across all four dimensions of alienation where the workers were alienated, were scoring high on those measures of alienation, that was point number one; and secondly we did identify this gap that I mentioned earlier. When we put to the workers 'How much involvement do you have in regard to –' about twenty different areas ranging from pretty narrowly-focused areas like the furniture in their rooms or in their work areas through to the budget and the direction and strategy of the enterprise, we got this consistent gap, perhaps not that surprising. But we also picked up, to create the gap, a high level of interest by the workers for more involvement across all areas, including the areas such as budget and strategy, so their interest for more involvement wasn't confined to the immediate work environment, which was seen as running counter to some other literature.

**Right, so were you aware of the South Australian Government's activities at the time?**

Oh, very much so. As I say, I quite explicitly sought a job in South Australia in order to get close to that sort of activity and this was getting me relatively close to it and indeed, of course, as subsequent events developed, got me right into the heart of it.

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**So what did you know about the Government's policies and activities at the time on worker participation in management or industrial democracy?**

Well, from memory, yes, indeed, the phraseology I think then was 'worker participation', so that for me was good but it also sounded a bit limited. As I said, I'd come from Scotland – Europe, if you like – and so the phrase 'industrial democracy' and the comprehensive set of changes that were kicking around in both Britain and Europe was really what I kind of had in my head, and so I did have an impression that the South Australian initiative was pointing in the right direction but probably not quite as developed as what I knew to be happening in the UK and more so in Europe.

**Did you know people who were working in the government area at the time?**

No. No, no. No, I didn't.

**But Phil Bentley was still at Flinders Uni.**

Phil Bentley, as I said, was one of the two leaders of the worker participation research project, but I knew him as a name simply because he had a couple of articles published in the *Journal of Industrial Relations* – I think at least one along with Barry Hughes. Barry Hughes was the other key figure at the Institute of Labour Studies when I arrived and of course he subsequently became, for a period, Dunstan's economic adviser. So out of that little group of people at the Institute Phil Bentley and Barry Hughes played quite key roles with me in a kind of subsidiary, secondary role.

**So how did you get to join the – I forget whether it was the Unit for Industrial Democracy or the Worker Participation Unit in the Government?**

I think it had already become the Unit for Industrial Democracy. It was I think part of the second phase, if you like, with the one becoming the other. Basically I came over as a package with Phil Bentley. Phil – and I don't know the details – obviously got approached. It transpired that he got the offer to become the new head of the Unit for Industrial Democracy, replacing Lyndon Prowse, and Phil basically said to me, 'I'd like you to come over with me.' And I said, 'Absolutely, yeah, I'm in.' I don't remember a specific interview or an application or anything – and that, of

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course, was pretty typical of quite a few things that happened – so Phil and I kind of more or less walked in around the same time.

**So this all sounded pretty interesting and you were wanting to have a go there.**

Oh, this was like what I'd thought of getting involved in; it had gone better than I had imagined it might, from being in South Australia in the vicinity of the whole Dunstan industrial democracy business I was moving right into the very heart of it.

**What was your role when you went in there?**

I was appointed as a, I think, senior project officer, whatever that meant. That was just the name. It was quite a bit more money; it was quite good money, actually, I must say, at the time, compared to the academic stuff, it was a bit of a bump up. And I pretty quickly became the unit's executive officer/contact person, whatever it was, for the two then existing overview committees for industrial democracy, one covering the public sector – Public Sector Advisory Committee, I think it was called – and one covering the private sector, both tripartite in form. So my job kind of became to facilitate the members of those committees to agree on industrial democracy policy and priorities, so I would spend a lot of time moving between individuals from the unions, the Government, the private sector – you know, drafts and so on – trying to get agreement.

**And what did you make of – was there a program that they were working to, or was it just focusing in one area or they had some change process going on, some strategic thinking?**

Yes, I think from memory – because don't forget Phil Bentley came over, myself, whatever, in this really phase two from the first period under Lyndon Prowse when the nomenclature was 'worker participation' and the focus was perhaps more narrowly-based on job enlargement, job enrichment, some involvement of Fred Emery's semi-autonomous workgroup idea, and that and other things had produced the reaction from the unions; there had been resolutions passed at ALP<sup>1</sup> State Conventions; in particular the then Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union, the leadership of John Scott, involvement of Ted Gnatenko, the co-ordinator of the job

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<sup>1</sup> ALP – Australian Labor Party.

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delegates out at the Holden's plant at Elizabeth; and also sitting alongside all of that Phil Drew working in the then emerging Trade Union Training Authority, they in particular had all responded and put together a union perspective on this and that had been massaged through the ALP State Convention but was now very much on the table as being something that needed to be responded to in terms of what the Unit for, now, Industrial Democracy did in the future. So basically I think Phil Bentley, myself, particularly Phil, was kind of brought over to deal with that and to respond to the new policy framework established at the State Convention of the Labor Party and work out how that would be implemented.

**Yes. So you were servicing these two committees.**

Yes.

**Who was the head of the private sector one?**

Yes, good question. The names that I remember perhaps because they were those that were most open, it seemed, to some of the ideas, in particular was Bob Ling[?] and John Menz – of course, John Menz being the link to Arnott–Motteram–Menz, where some of the research was carried out. But also actually Bob Ling from the crowd that do the clothesline –

**Hill's hoist.**

– Hill's hoist, yes –

**Yes, Hills Industries.**

– Hills Industries – he was a tougher nut, more sceptical about the whole business, but he actually also was relatively supportive, but less so than John Menz and – I forget the name I just mentioned.

**Ling.**

Yes. Also there was the lad from the optical –

**Solar. Was it Ross .....? David Pank**

– there was somebody from there who subsequently got involved in the Australian Democrats. It was David Pank.

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**Can't remember – yes, Solar International, the lens makers.**

Yes. So those guys I remember particularly from the private sector side were somewhat open, and particularly John Menz.

**What about the public sector? Was that Graham Inns or Bill Voysey[?]?**

No, it was before Bill Voysey. Bill Voysey was still in the backblocks then really, from memory. It was Graham Inns, it was David Mercer. Plus Mary Beasley and Nick Hakoff.

**Right; Lindsay Bowes?**

Yes,

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Bowes was very much, yes, kind of lurking in the background; good point.

**Bannon?**

No, John Bannon I think had just left it. But yes, Lindsay Bowes wasn't *on* it but he was lurking in the background. Phil Lennox from the PSA<sup>2</sup> was there, and there was another guy from the Public Service Board, David – a relatively young lad, a bit on the rise at the time.

**Mitchell?**

David Mitchell, yes. But David Mercer, yes, I think was quite important, was on that committee.

**Just to get back to that sense of was there an overall strategy, though, of following through or was it just sort of hit-or-miss depending on the reactions of the time?**

Well, as I say, the fundamental policy framework had just been changed and as part of that change I guess there was a continuing debate about to what extent should the initiatives be pushed forward in the private sector or the public sector. I think previously there had actually been, relatively speaking, a focus on the private sector and again that reflected Lyndon Prowse's Luv Pet Food background, and also reflected the fact that the actual change agenda was more narrowly-limited to those ideas, job enrichment, job enlargement, autonomous workgroups. But along with the change of strategy in terms of the actual policy there was probably somewhat of a shift to focus on the public sector and to try and spend a year or two demonstrating, getting good things happening in the public sector, in order to I think simultaneously reduce the heat that had come from the unions – particularly the Manufacturing Workers' Union – in the private sector but also to just give, I think, the private sector representatives some breathing space and focus a bit more on the public sector for experimentation; and also because the policy framework had a bigger ambit now because it was now looking at change at all three levels, those three levels being the immediate workplace level, the autonomous workgroup job enrichment stuff; the kind of middling level where ideas of joint consultation were

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<sup>2</sup> PSA – Public Service Association.



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being kicked around; and then, if you like, the ‘top’ level where there was some thinking about board-level changes. And that became a bit of a mantra, that industrial democracy had to be developed at all three levels if it was to be sustained.

**Did any of that work sort of involve scanning of the broader social and economic environment to see what were goers and what wasn’t, like what sort of context was this strategy being attempted?**

Yes, I’ve been thinking about that. My basic answer would be not that much scanning happened. However, my recollection is that in the early phase, even before Bentley and I came on the scene and when we were on the scene, a lot of what had been getting attempted by way of change was in response to – this is my *memory*, but I’m not sure what the actual objective reality would be – was in response to relatively high labour turnover and absenteeism. That was certainly the case at Arnott–Motteram–Menz biscuit factory. And so to a fair extent, in terms of any kind of economic or bottom-line payoff-type result from doing any of this stuff, I think in the very early period it was mainly related to dealing with high levels of absenteeism and turnover rather than some broader economic development strategy.

**Or some ideology or something about democracy.**

Ah! Well, in terms of that, I – and I think even before I came here – I’d picked up enough about Dunstan and the stuff about his struggle around the then limitations of political democracy, the ‘Playford gerrymander’ as well as issues to do with the role of the Legislative Council in South Australia, and I always – and maybe it was just in *my* mind more than anybody else’s but I certainly talked about it – saw Dunstan’s interest in worker participation and industrial democracy as a not-very-surprising lead-on extension from his interest in political democracy. I mean, he just seemed to me like a guy who’d spent twenty or twenty-five years focused almost as a number one agenda on sorting the gerrymander and elements of *political* democracy and so that flowed quite naturally through to, ‘Well, okay, around the broad idea of democracy what follows through, what next? Industrial democracy.’ So I certainly saw that logic and talked about it at that time, but I’m not sure whether that was really all that explicit and I never talked directly to Dunstan about that link as to what extent it was part of what was happening.

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**And did anybody in the Unit talk about what he thought, like Phil or any of the others?**

It was Phil who mainly had the direct contact with Dunstan. The rest of us had contact on a few occasions. And so we were generally speaking very much relying on Phil in respect to what Dunstan might think or how he might respond to specific things happening in the Unit. And really quite a lot of things *were* happening in the Unit because, as I say, the Union, the Metal Worker-driven policy, was not something I think that Dunstan fully and wholeheartedly supported, and so to some extent Bentley's job was to kind of create an actual policy, an actual activity by the Unit, that didn't fully follow through on that. And that's why that struggle then got internalised into the Unit itself.

**Can we just talk about who was actually on-side that you are picking up as you're working with these committees and, more broadly, were there any champions that you'd come across?**

My recollection is that to an extent there were – not quite champions, although almost champions, that's my memory of John Menz and David Pank from Sola Optical. More so, actually, than in the public sector. I really didn't feel that any of the – you know, David Mercer or the other people operating at the senior level in the public service were tuned into it all well. That was partly coloured, I suppose, one of my early experiences was working around trying to get industrial democracy happening in the South Australian Housing Trust and that iconic great success story of the previous thirty years, and going over one day on a small aircraft to Whyalla sitting alongside Alex Ramsay, the I think somewhat legendary head of the Housing Trust since the 1930s or certainly from way back, to talk to Housing Trust employees in Whyalla about what the Government, the Dunstan, the Unit for Industrial Democracy, framework was in regard to getting it happening in their backyard. And my recollection is that Alex Ramsay was clearly not at all comfortable with this stuff and probably found it a bit bizarre that he was sitting next to me, this very youthful, long-haired person with a Scottish accent who was articulating this alternative way of running the Housing Trust. I mean, in retrospect I can well understand why he might have responded that way.

**But did you actually see him talk to his employees about it?**

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Yes. He and I met with a group of the staff – all the staff, really, over there – and he did his spiel and I did mine.

**Can you remember what he said, or a summary of it?**

Not with any clarity, except I certainly came away with a strong impression that he wasn't a champion for industrial democracy. But then again – and maybe jumping ahead here a little, again partly in retrospect – as we found out when Dunstan resigned, there really weren't any champions in the Cabinet, so there are I think quite some issues and questions about the whole business of champions other than within the Unit for Industrial Democracy being developed, as I say, even within Cabinet. So ironically I think I can't recall clearly champions at the senior level of the public service and we know – it would seem that there weren't any champions when it came to the test within Cabinet.

**And can you remember some of the details of what you told the Housing Trust people?**

Well, by then – and this perhaps made somebody like Alex Ramsay uncomfortable – we were certainly by then putting to the workers whenever we addressed them – and a lot of the work of the staff of the Unit for Industrial Democracy, apart from me working with these committees, was going out into workplaces to put the policy framework in front of people and to work out ways of implementing it – but it was this policy framework of these three levels: you know, the immediate work context level; the middling consultative framework level; and the board level. And that was certainly the case in the Housing Trust. Then of course it also sat alongside the whole business of preconditions for industrial democracy that had been built into the report – it was the ALP–Union Work Environment Committee Report – that had been the body that had put together this second-generation policy comprising, as I say, a set of preconditions for industrial democracy, this industrial democracy at all levels policy, the core idea that the union be the single channel of representation. That was what we were then talking about.

**What were the workers' reactions after you'd given your talk and Alex Ramsay had given his?**

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Look, I really don't think I could say much. I mean, we went to the Whyalla – I think it was in, actually, the Whyalla Workers' Club and we had beers afterwards, and I think I recall, as was typically the case, a bunch of people gathering round me as the person from Dunstan, the industrial democracy person, and getting involved in quite animated conversations. So there certainly was interest, even possibly a deal of excitement, about what this might mean; but quite where it led to and so on is harder to say – although, actually, what it did lead to, typically, was priorities being sorted out about projects, there were specific projects that were to be pursued, and the allocation to different individuals in the Unit for Industrial Democracy of different projects, like for example the Housing Trust, and then you would get into the nuts and bolts of doing some research usually, quite often using a version of the survey instruments that had been developed in the Institute of Labour Studies to kind of investigate in workplace by workplace this question of where did people have influence, where did they want influence, what was the gap, and using that then as the basis for working out what to do next.

**Do you know who did the work with the Housing Trust, the detailed work?**

Yes, that was pursued by the Housing Trust and I think myself and at least one other person from the Unit – I can't quite remember who it was – did actually, over six months or a year or more period, get involved in a combination of research, meetings with employees, with managers, establishment of an industrial democracy steering committee to pursue the implementation.

**And were there any successes in all of that process?**

Well, put it this way: there were certainly the undertaking of the research phase, the findings that yes, indeed, yet again, these employees are interested in more involvement in a whole bunch of areas, that those areas weren't confined to changing the colour of the toilet rolls, and so therefore on the face of it this three-level strategy could play a role. And so in the case of the Housing Trust, yes, there was changes – joint consultative committees were established, there was efforts to get job enrichment, semi-autonomous workgroups going, and ideas were kicked around about the board being changed.

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Out of all, though, I think the bit that got furthest – not that far, and it was all over so quickly; you know, two or three years – was probably the joint consultative council bit. It got further than either the immediate workplace stuff, is my recollection, or the board-level stuff, and to a fair extent it became pretty much an exercise in developing joint consultative committees would be again my recollection.

**And were there any significant movements on any particular issue or two or three that came out of those committees, that committee, that you can think of?**

I'm not immediately thinking of anything on that. It may come to me. I just need to think a little bit more about that.

**Now, you mentioned earlier – and I'll come back to this now – there were various perspectives, I think, that you were alluding to in the Unit itself. Can you talk about that a bit?**

Probably the dominant one, and it's a clash – well, two; one was over the idea of the union as a single channel of representation, and related to that was quite how one dealt with this idea of preconditions for industrial democracy, and in a way what that really got down to was how the members of the Unit went about the very early stages of pursuing a particular initiative. I guess the two positions were probably the one that I was associated with, namely that to really deliver on the idea of the union as a single channel of representation you had to spend the first three months or first period, say in the Housing Trust or somewhere else, the Lands Department, talking exclusively to the employees and their union representatives – both workplace-based representatives and union officials – and that's what you focused on, *before* you involved management. That was one view, and it certainly I guess was associated with me, about the best way to set the scene for following through on this idea of the union as the single channel of representation.

The other view was that from the beginning you could and you should involve management, and that wasn't counter to or likely to be detrimental to any further developments that might undermine this idea of the union as the single channel of representation. And that in turn got caught up with these other four or five precondition areas, which I must say again I can't fully and accurately remember what they were, but it's all written down in policy documents. Because the idea I

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was driving was the unions and the employees and the job delegates needed this initial three-month period sort of on their own to just get their act together in general, as well as to look specifically at the four or five preconditions areas to work out basically what their kind of bargaining, negotiating position was going to be, before you then took it forward into discussions with management.

**So it's sort of seen as a broader industrial negotiation-type context rather than some other change process that was being adopted earlier and might have been an alternative?**

Yes. I mean, I think indeed that union response to the first phase and the generation of this second-phase policy from the Work Environment Committee Report built around those two core ideas of a bunch of preconditions, union as single channel and industrial democracy at all three levels was now really the focus of a struggle in terms of the practice of the Unit for Industrial Democracy and the project officers within the Unit and how they went about the job of pursuing the policy. As I say, there was that one position that I was certainly pursuing; the other position was 'No, you don't need it, you can get straight in among the management and get the thing moving and sort it out as you go.'

**And what happened with that dynamic, was it constructive or destructive, or both?**

It was probably both. And I think it was for quite some period different people were doing it a bit differently, and so it went. However, there was that somewhat memorable meeting where after maybe a year or so people kind of doing it differently in terms of this whole business of how you went about ensuring that the union is or might be the single channel of representation came to a head at a Unit meeting. By this time the Unit had probably gone to twenty – it was at its peak, in terms of the number of people working in it – and there was a debate, there was a vote about this very point, about what did you do: did you only talk to the unions for a first phase before you talked to management? And that position I think was put by me, I think it was seconded by Graham Harbord, who joined the Unit in the interim as a kind of legal person, and it got the numbers in the Unit meeting. But then I think from memory I had left or had to leave, did leave, there was a phone call or to go to the loo or something, and no sooner had I gone than Phil – goodness

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gracious – said, ‘Shut the door’, locked me out and I heard subsequently really laid down the law to the people trapped in the room by this time. While I don’t believe there was like a second vote to rescind this vote, in effect this stalled any change in the policy that might have occurred so that those individuals in the Unit who weren’t perhaps champion around that idea were free to continue doing whatever they did. So in retrospect maybe not a bad thing that you had these different approaches being pursued.

**What were the arguments again? Was there argument about good change processes or was it more of an ideologically-based argument?**

It was probably more ideologically-based, in terms of how it was being presented. Yes, I think that would be fair to say.

**And the unions’ single channel, that’s very broad policy, but was there anybody in Trades Hall actually riding shotgun on this, like one of the key State union people, or was it more of an individual union basis?**

Well, I think where it kind of crystallised in terms of the union was back to, as I mentioned previously, probably Phil Drew and his emerging role at the Trade Union Training Authority – quite strategic, of course – and some time in this period Phil had got appointed I think as the first ever employee with the then-emerging Trade Union Training Authority in Adelaide – this was happening around the country – and he indeed became the first Director of the South Australian Trade Union Training Authority – this was a time of growth and suddenly there was courses – and so these policy positions were very much being put forward in the courses and programs the Trade Union Training Authority was running. Phil Drew had offered me the job as deputy director at TUTA but I took the Dunstan job to be more directly involved in the ID Unit. So it was getting probably quite a wide coverage at the time to job delegates, union officials.

**Who was UTLC<sup>3</sup> head at the time, was it Bob Gregory or – –?**

It was Bob Gregory, yes. Again, from an AMWU union background, of course.

**Where did he come into any of this, if anything?**

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<sup>3</sup> UTLC – United Trades and Labour Council.

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Less so, to my knowledge. It was being driven – John Scott, the then Secretary of the Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union, Ted Gnatenko, Phil Drew, those were the three key players from that union and really I think in terms of the whole agenda. Actually, on the public sector side a lot of the push and almost the championing of it came in fact from Jim Otte and his base in the Lands Department, and of course he emerged if not quite then a bit later the PSA secretary role, and his early death actually was just one other factor that kind of – something of a champion that was lost.

**And were there any particular issues ruled out in terms of discussion, like single-union channel but these committees or whatever weren't to discuss Topic A, B, C?**

Yes. Well, I guess that crystallised around the role of the joint consultative councils and, as I say, I think from memory in retrospect they probably were the bit of the three-part model that got a bit more of a run. Yes, so there were issues about what they could and couldn't discuss, and if you like that was a constraint on their role. On the more positive side of their role, the research I mentioned that originated up at Flinders at the Institute of Labour Studies, it became a bigger and bigger part of the agenda, more resources were put into doing ever more studies of workers about this gap business to try and use that as a focus for answering the question of 'Where do we start with this stuff?' and it was an effort obviously to try and start with stuff that did have meaning and was felt to have priority from the actual workers in the particular enterprises, so that was probably quite a good thing, that side of it.

**Can you remember any of the major issues that were pursued within these councils that actually achieved anything?**

It did in fact deal with some of the more limited issues of rosters was one issue I recall; issues of training and who was involved in training. There was in some cases I think some increased involvement about budget and financial matters, particularly around provision of information earlier in the decision-making cycle. I'd need to think again about that. I guess the implication is, depending on my limited memory recall, it was a pretty narrow array. I think again, as I prompt myself, one perhaps exception to that was I got involved towards the end, so that means kicking on through '78 and right up into '79 and it all ground to a stop of course in February



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'79 when Dunstan resigned, was down at the Central Linen Service where the joint consultative council that got established there got into some issues about how the factory floor was being run and a bit more nitty-gritty stuff, and that was strongly supported by it would have been the Miscellaneous Workers' Union – again, George Young would have been another something of a champion of it, certainly comfortable with it, and using it. I think some unions and union officials started using it to try and get more involvement in some of the daily decisions affecting their members.

**Just to get back to that discussion with the Unit itself, was there any fallout after that – I'll call it 'broad resolution' of the issue about working with the unions for a long time first *versus* management, did people just generally accept things and get on with things, or – – –?**

My best recollection is people just accepted things and got on with things, and it meant, as I think I said earlier, different individuals could do it their own way. And nobody really knew, of course, what was happening in individual projects because people would just go off and do their own thing. So I would be off doing *my* stuff giving it *my* spin in the projects I was involved in and I assumed Ken Wang, Charles Connolly[?], all the others were off just doing *their* spin on their projects. Again, my memory is Phil, for example, Phil Bentley, my memory is he didn't really get involved in any hands-on projects; it was the others of us who did that.

**So you didn't use to come back and reflect on your experiences and talk about improved ways to do things?**

Oh, yes, you would. There was regular Unit meetings and sharing of information and experiences and so on, yes, for sure. But that still left you able to say what you said, to perhaps not say some stuff and to go back and do – more or less put your own interpretation and spin on what actually happened on the ground. So I suspect there was quite considerable variation there. Probably, I think in terms of the continuum, I was probably at one end of it and I expect there'd be someone like Ken Wang was at the other end in terms of what we did when we went off into our individual projects.

**And there was nobody in particular evaluating what was going on and saying, 'Well, look, this seems to be – notwithstanding what you're all saying, here seems to be a good way to do things or not to do things'?**

**Stewart SWEENEY**

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Not direct evaluation, would be my recollection. Probably some guidance and change to the framework emerged in the form actually of a couple of Unit for Industrial Democracy papers that Phil Bentley had a major hand in writing and bits of which were picked up and woven into speeches that Don Dunstan gave, and quite often that in turn would involve Mike Rann. So a fair bit of the policy evolution, post- the union intervention, would have involved Phil Bentley doing his spin on what the policy might be or might become and bits of that, as I say, in turn getting picked up by Mike Rann who had arrived by this time as the first and only kind of media person, but also became speech person and therefore made his initial connection with Premier Dunstan.

**What was the general feel around the team? ‘We’re all in this together’?**

Absolutely. Oh, yes, yes. It was a very positive – it sits in my memory as probably still the best of times and it was very much you really did live it: you were working long hours, you were lunching together, you were drinking together, everybody was going to everybody else’s houses. The spill-over from work and play or leisure was considerable and it did combine intellectual dimension, ideological dimension, practical dimension. We were all relatively young and running around town meeting with all the top end of town, really. You know, we were basically a bunch of twenty-year-olds and maybe early thirties, but many of us were twenty-year-olds, and we were sitting around tables with people like Alec Ramsay and David Mercer and so on and so forth.

**And what sense did you have of what they thought about what was going on – I know you talked about Alec earlier – was it, ‘Oh, this is all interesting and dynamic’ or is it, ‘What the hell are these young people doing?’**

I think it was both of that, yes, I think it was both of that. Obviously it was one part of the whole Dunstan wave of reforms and so it certainly couldn’t be ignored, but you were left with the impression that for a lot of people in the public sector senior levels they got to the stage [of] having to be seen to give it space, but I’m not sure if many of them gave it that much oxygen.

**And again within the Unit, was there any sense of what people thought about Don Dunstan and these very broad reform ideas?**

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Yes. People were just excited and enthusiastic to push this as much as they could. They were just – yeah, tremendous commitment to the core idea of change and industrial democracy, you know, from quite a mixed bunch of people in terms of their backgrounds. There was sociologists, psychologists, lawyers, economists, media people, engineers, finance people. So it was a bit of a mix. I mean, it was in the public sector but it had a sort of autonomy and certainly I think Phil Bentley was ideal in maximising that autonomy. It was a research outfit, it was a kind of change outfit, it was a political outfit. Yes, it was quite a mixture of different things that aren't often combined or haven't often been combined.

**Did they talk about Don at the time, like what they thought about him and what he was up to?**

Yes. Yes, yes. But probably just relatively narrowly around this agenda. It was sort of all-consuming. Again, I'm not sure of the timing, I don't have any – I mean, we were always out lunching, both just lunches among people in the group but also lunches were used to talk to public sector, private sector, union people, and that again was part of the times, I suppose, but certainly part of Phil Bentley's approach and I think it did get results. But, having said that, I don't have any clear image at the end – and I'm not sure of the timing that people were necessarily reading Don Dunstan's cookbook or anything like that. The industrial democracy thing was all-consuming, that was the focus.

**And I'm just trying to recollect, you went over to the Board at some stage. Can you just talk about that and –**

Yes.

**– why you went over there and, secondly, what you were doing there?**

Yes, as best I can. And I have some difficulty just with the dates and so on, but I assume – I think Bentley and I – I mean, they're [?on/wrong?] here but I think Bentley and I must have went over there end of '76, maybe beginning of '77 from Flinders University, and it was in that period where there was a bit of a shift from the focus in the private sector to the public sector. But nevertheless, through I think certainly all of '77 and into '78 I had a foot in both camps, private sector and public sector. But sometime in '78, I think it must have been after the international

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industrial democracy conference, which I was the person organising – and just as an aside there, which I may have mentioned before, one little sign for me of how far you could push this and how far you couldn't, and I, I suppose, saw myself within there pushing it as far as I could, further maybe than most others around me, one little symbol of that was I tried to get Tony Benn out from the UK to speak at that conference and he, of course, was associated with many things in the UK including something called the Institute for Workers' Control, and working with a number of other key people in the UK, and that from memory was about the only speaker idea that got knocked back, so to just give you a little hint as to where a line might be drawn. Probably by Phil Bentley; I don't think it got to Dunstan as such. You never know.

And I think therefore it must have been after that conference in maybe March '78 I left the Unit for Industrial Democracy to go over – and Phil had very much set this up – to really try and get a second wave of stuff happening in the public sector because, as I said, from late '76 through all of '77 and then into the first part of '78 the focus had probably been much more on the public sector and specifically on these joint consultative councils. Some progress had been made, councils had been established, research had been done to look at this gap between influence people had, influence people wanted, but the thing, perhaps, it was a bit stalled, it wasn't happening on the three levels – the workplace level, the autonomous workgroup idea and the board level – and so Phil, Dunstan, I don't know, came up with the thought that somebody needs to be parachuted straight into the Public Service Board to become the Public Service Board Industrial Democracy Officer, and that person for good or ill was me. And so I had this interview with 'the Board' and I don't think there was any question I was going to get the job, but nevertheless – unlike when I first joined the Unit – there was actually an interview for this one. And I was duly appointed and moved over and sat where the Board was in the State Admin Building – or was it the Reserve Bank? – anyway, I moved location; and my first task was in finalising the new Public Service Board industrial democracy policy, which was to be then promulgated throughout the public sector. Also the other part of my task was to actually get industrial democracy happening within the staff of the Public Service Board, so I still had a project role but now my project

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wasn't all of these projects, private and public sector. I had one project: it was industrial democracy, as per the new public sector policy, in the Public Service Board but also right through the public sector, and so that was what happened.

But of course we only had a year because – as we didn't know, of course, but within the year, really, less than a year, February '79, Don Dunstan resigned. And so within that year some stuff happened but there wasn't much time. One of the things that was set in train to get that base level area going, the semi-autonomous workgroups, was the business of looking at changes to the *Public Service Act* to allow autonomous workgroups to become part of the scene. And that's pretty fundamental stuff because the whole basis of employment law is based on the individual and the public sector's built on individually-based duty statements and so on and so forth and now we were talking about establishing the group of employees as the basic building block for work, what happened in terms of employment. So it was quite a ground shift. That was where in the beginning period Sue Walpole worked on that but I think through that year and before it finished Sue left and Graham Harbord came in on that with a legal background, and that became a big part of what I was involved in in that less than a year in that role.

The other part was probably working with the then staff development function – a relatively new function in and across the public service – and this is where [I had] a close working relationship with Peter Fleming[?], who was a pretty important player as he rose and got involved in those sorts of areas, and for a time I actually worked alongside Peter because a big part of what I was doing was getting changes happening to what was being delivered through public sector staff development, that became the vehicle for informing public servants what the new policy was and what was to happen in pursuing that policy. So my previously daily close, all-consuming interaction and relationship with Phil Bentley then got paralleled by and to some extent replaced by what became a daily all-consuming relationship with Peter Fleming in the public sector period.

**You mentioned earlier David Mitchell, but there was another chap there, John Burdett –**

John Burdett, yes.

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**– yes, and I’m just wondering how you related to them.**

Not much interaction and they were seen as not particularly on-side. Fleming became the on-side champion in that period. And I think he was, he got a bit interested.

**Yes. The reason why I asked that question is I think Burdett was head of some organisational review group and you’d think they’d be an integral –**

Yes.

**– ally anyway if there was going to be some change process going on.**

Yes. Not in my recollection. I may be wrong there. As I say, it’s the link with Fleming and the staff development function, which may be a reasonably accurate description of the general impression I’m left with, that especially in the public sector champions really were few and far between. Now that I’ve brought Peter Fleming to mind he would have been an exception. Yes, Peter Fleming on the management side; Jim Otte[?] on the union side, were probably two that I can now recall really came in on the activity.

**Graham Inns was head of Premier’s at the time?**

Yes.

**And where did he sit on all that?**

Again, I had little to do with Graham Inns and was not left with any impression he was a champion, pretty much hands-off. And pretty much I do recall that Phil Bentley quite regularly was having battles with Graham Inns, so that probably helped colour my perception that Inns wasn’t ‘one of us’. There was a bit of an ‘us and them’ part to it all, and understandable from both sides; but again somehow Don Dunstan’s ability and authority and charisma wasn’t quite able, it would seem, to make the breakthroughs needed in what actually was probably the toughest area that he tackled.

**And what about Hedley Bachmann[?], was he around?**

Yes, and I’d definitely put him in the negative camp. Yes, for sure. Hedley and Lindsay both – I mean, Lindsay and Phil Bentley were close and that in turn was a

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nexus through to Jack Wright, but again my impression is that neither Hedley nor Jack really got their head around this stuff and certainly never became champions, and that would be consistent with what happened when Dunstan resigned.

**So what actually did happen? I know Don Dunstan resigned; what happened to the Unit in terms of its future?**

Well, my best memory as well – first of all, Phil Bentley and I were down to Parliament on the day that Dunstan resigned and we were right there, and of course by this time we had that ongoing link through Mike Rann, who had been in the Unit, left the Unit, got the job with Dunstan and so on. Everybody was shell-shocked and we certainly knew on that day that the party's over for industrial democracy, and so it proved to be. I have this memory of the Unit, I think, was transferred out of the – Des Corcoran came in and the Unit was transferred out the Premier's Department into Department of Labour and kind of limped along, really, till the election I think in September that year. But we sort of knew we were kind of dead men walking, that was the feeling. That's my recollection.

Certainly with me being in the Public Service Board they knew the pressure was off even to be seen to be doing that much, so that really the atmospherics changed.

**Just to go back to the – you mentioned the industrial democracy conference.**

Yes.

**Given all those papers and whatever, can you recall where you sort of placed the South Australian experience in the world experience?**

Well, we thought it was as good as anything that was around because interestingly I think even Phil, who to some extent had tried to kind of move away from following through on that policy, the Work Environment Committee Report of preconditions, union as single channel, industrial democracy at all three levels, that was the elements of the model, that kind of got put back up in lights for the purpose of the conference. As I say, it was a little bit more complex in terms of the reality of what was happening on the ground, and certainly as a model it probably did scrub up quite well in terms of what was happening in the UK and around Europe, it pretty well covered the tracks.

**And delegates were saying to you, the overseas people – –?**

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Yes, we were getting ticks in the box from various visitors about how splendid this policy was and people were visiting the Unit from overseas, some people came and spent some time in the Unit, and for a period it was seen as a model of kind of world interest.

**Just to round up, do you see any legacies, particularly over a period of time, of the work that was done and the thinking in industrial democracy?**

My basic answer is no, that it all ended too soon. It would have been different, I guess, if possibly only one more year, even one more term of Parliament, had been involved with Don Dunstan still as Premier because the proposed changes to the *Public Service Act* incorporating the provisions to allow for autonomous workgroups to be part of the structure would arguably have been legislated for and that would have been something legal and regulatory and substantive that could have made a difference; but that didn't happen. So it's pretty hard to say anything directly coming out of those South Australian initiatives.

More broadly, of course, versions of at least two of the levels – the autonomous workgroup level and the consultative council level – in varying degrees have become bundled into almost mainstream management ideas and approaches in the time since. That, I think, is as much just a part of a general shift in thinking as anything to do with the specific South Australian industrial democracy initiatives.

It did live on in the form of ACTU<sup>4</sup> policy because the ACTU, specifically Bill Kelty and Peter Nolan, there was meetings held between Phil Bentley, myself, Kelty and Nolan to develop the ACTU policy, and it also lived on to a degree in both New South Wales and Victorian State Government levels, where they set up versions of the Unit for Industrial Democracy.

**All right. Well, thanks very much, Stewart. That's been a very rich interview. This is the end of the interview, thanks very much.**

END OF INTERVIEW.

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<sup>4</sup> ACTU – Australian Council of Trade Unions.